



“Understanding The Psalms”



Rev. Peggy Casteel-Huston
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Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 58:6-9

- ⁶ O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!
- ⁷ Let them vanish like water that runs away;
like grass let them be trodden down^[a] and wither.
- ⁸ Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime;
like the untimely birth that never sees the sun.
- ⁹ Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns,
whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!

Psalm 103

- ¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
- ² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
- ³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
- ⁴ who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
- ⁵ who satisfies you with good as long as you live^[a]
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- ⁶ The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.
- ⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
- ⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- ⁹ He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
- ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

- 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- 12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
- 13 As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
- 14 For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.
- 15 As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
- 16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
- 17 But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
- 18 to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.
- 19 The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.
- 20 Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.
- 21 Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers that do his will.
- 22 Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the Lord, O my soul.

Psalm 109

- 1 Do not be silent, O God of my praise.
- 2 For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me,
speaking against me with lying tongues.
- 3 They beset me with words of hate,
and attack me without cause.
- 4 In return for my love they accuse me,
even while I make prayer for them.
- 5 So they reward me evil for good,
and hatred for my love.
- 6 They say, "Appoint a wicked man against him;
let an accuser stand on his right.
- 7 When he is tried, let him be found guilty;
let his prayer be counted as sin.
- 8 May his days be few;
may another seize his position.

- 9 May his children be orphans,
and his wife a widow.
- 10 May his children wander about and beg;
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.
- 11 May the creditor seize all that he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.
- 12 May there be no one to do him a kindness,
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.
- 13 May his posterity be cut off;
may his name be blotted out in the second generation.
- 14 May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the LORD,
and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.
- 15 Let them be before the LORD continually,
and may his memory be cut off from the earth.
- 16 For he did not remember to show kindness,
but pursued the poor and needy
and the brokenhearted to their death.
- 17 He loved to curse; let curses come on him.
He did not like blessing; may it be far from him.
- 18 He clothed himself with cursing as his coat,
may it soak into his body like water,
like oil into his bones.
- 19 May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself,
like a belt that he wears every day."
- 20 May that be the reward of my accusers from the LORD,
of those who speak evil against my life.
- 21 But you, O LORD my Lord,
act on my behalf for your name's sake;
because your steadfast love is good, deliver me.
- 22 For I am poor and needy,
and my heart is pierced within me.
- 23 I am gone like a shadow at evening;
I am shaken off like a locust.
- 24 My knees are weak through fasting;
my body has become gaunt.
- 25 I am an object of scorn to my accusers;
when they see me, they shake their heads.
- 26 Help me, O LORD my God!
Save me according to your steadfast love.
- 27 Let them know that this is your hand;
you, O LORD, have done it.
- 28 Let them curse, but you will bless.
Let my assailants be put to shame; may your servant be glad.
- 29 May my accusers be clothed with dishonor;

may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle.

³⁰ With my mouth I will give great thanks to the LORD;
I will praise him in the midst of the throng.

³¹ For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
to save them from those who would condemn them to death.

The word of the Lord, let our thanks be to God.

Today our scriptures and sermon are based on the psalms. I think that I speak for many of us who may say that we have a “love/dislike (for the word hate is too strong)” relationship with the psalms. While we love the psalms that praise God and where we hear God speaking words of comfort to us, there are also the psalms of complaint and psalms of vengeance that are painful to our sensibilities.

This is where I found myself with the psalms until I read Walter Brueggemann’s, Praying The Psalms.

Walter Brueggemann is an influential Bible scholar and interpreter of our time. He is a Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia University which is a Presbyterian seminary. He is known for his rhetorical criticism which means that he analyzes words, phrases, images, gestures that people use to communicate, and he does this with Old Testament literature.

The reason that I introduce you to Walter Brueggemann is that he is a scholar of language. He interprets the Old Testament scripture so that his reader has a much deeper understanding of the text rather than trying to understand the text based on face value. Now I will tell you that Brueggemann can and does make startling statements, but he gets you thinking and looking deeper on the interrelationships between God and humanity.

Today, I am going to give you a sampling or a taste of Brueggemann. Fasten your seat belts as here we go.

To begin thinking about the psalms Brueggemann wants us to remember some of the ‘conditions’ of our humanity, such as:

- times where we are securely oriented. These are times when we are well settled, things are going as planned, life makes sense and God is well-placed in heaven. This mood is minimal in the psalms. Psalm 145 is one where the psalmist trusts everything to God. As

Brueggemann reminds us, most of the psalms do not emerge from places of equilibrium rather places of dislocation and relocation.

- the second condition of our humanity are times when we are dislocated. These are experiences in our lives where we may feel overwhelmed, nearly destroyed, events that drive us to the edge of humanness, events that have disrupted our security as we know it. That is what we hear in many of the psalms and ones that we will consider today. The psalmist has had something happen in their lives that has dislocated their security and in bold ways they give voice of that to God. What is wonderful about these types of psalms is that so often in our humanity we cover up the dislocation we may feel in our lives so that others think we are doing just fine, so these psalms announce that life is not like that but rather a constant churning, disruptive experience of dislocation and relocation.
- the third condition of our humanity are times when we are relocated or when we move from a period of disorientation to a new orientation. It is not a move where everything is back to normal or the way things once were, rather they are times that we realize the gifts of friendship, caring, gestures of reconciliation and forgiveness that we received during our time of disorientation, times that we are once again able to give thanks to God and bless God. Psalm 30 is a good example when the psalmists says, "O Yahweh, my God, I cried out to you for help, and you have healed me."

Brueggemann reminds us that when we pray, we are never to censure or deny the deepness of our own human pilgrimage. When we pray we tend to be honest with God.

Today we are going to look at 3 psalms: Psalm 58 about our want for vengeance; Psalm 103, a psalm about God's **hesed** or steadfast love; and Psalm 109 which wrestles with life in society where hesed or **steadfast love** is not the order of the day.

Start with reading of Psalm 58: 6-9. In church, we read these texts and then sweetly and nicely say, "The word of the Lord, thanks be to God".

Brueggemann says that we read these psalms and believe that Christians ought not to feel that way, but the reality is that there may be times in our lives where we do yearn for vengeance. The question is what do you do with it?

We have 3 choices:

1. Act it out – get a gun and shoot the person. This is terrible and we see that too often in our society.
2. Deny it – but in doing that what psychologists are trying to help us to learn is that by denying our anger or our thirst for vengeance it comes out of us in other ways – which may not be healthy for us or for those who live around us.
3. Give it over to God – which is what Brueggemann says that the psalmists are doing. In other words, they are saying, “I am being eaten alive by my anger, so God I am giving it over to you.” Brueggemann uses the illustration of a child being hurt by another sibling and wanting his parent to hurt his sibling back in return. The parent could say sure I’ll write down and do to them what you want me to do but the wise parent would say, “leave it with me and I’ll decide what needs to be done” which is what Brueggemann believes is the situation between the psalmist and God.

In Psalm 103, Brueggemann sees *hesed* or God’s steadfast love better defined as God’s tenacious solidarity. For Brueggemann, God is the one who stood in tenacious solidarity with the nation of Israel, God is the one who continues to stand in tenacious solidarity with the oppressed, the weak, those persecuted for their faith, and God is the one who stands in tenacious solidarity with you and with me.

Because of our relationship with God, we have come to know a God who redeems, forgives, heals, crowns us with compassion – all the things we least expect from God.

This psalmist tells us that the God who calls us is on our side standing with us. This is a God who is merciful, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in great love. (Slow to anger – *aw-rake* in Hebrew which literally means that God’s anger cools off as God breathes His anger in).

God’s love is so great for us that God’s love conquers sin and removes our transgressions. God’s tenacious solidarity stands with us helping us to handle our greatest problems. No matter where we are, no matter where we go, no matter what happens to us, God is standing with us.

As believers, we think differently from those who seek power, or from those who believe that they can be in control of everything; or from those who

believe that happiness can be bought, and anxiety lessened by our ability to stay in control.

The psalmist is reminding himself (and therefore others) that we have a tenacious God who stands with us and will not let us go. It is the hymn, "Oh love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee; I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be" (George Matheson).

We need God and according to the psalmist this is a God that loves us despite our greatest mistakes and stands beside us and does not repay us according to our wrongdoings.

The final psalm we will consider is Psalm 109. It is one of those psalms that rarely if ever gets read in the church. The psalm imagines that the psalmist, the good person, is being unjustly put on trial by a wicked person. The wicked person is doing wrong things to the good person out of vengeance. The good person is putting into words all the vengeance they believe is in the heart of the wicked one (or their adversary) toward them. The good one believes that the wicked one feels vengeance so much so that the wicked one is asking God to show no steadfast love and not to stand in tenacious solidarity with the good one.

It is part of our human condition to want vengeance. We see vengeance acted out blatantly in gang wars and not so blatantly as we shun people or shut them out because we don't want them around us.

Brueggemann takes great delight in the psalmist telling God what God needs to do. The psalmist wants God to act in a certain way because the psalmist believes that if God acts in this way, then the wicked will know that they are attacking God's person as if God's reputation needs defending. The psalmist wants the wicked to know that God stands with him in **tenacious solidarity**.

This is also a psalm of complaint. In several of the psalms we hear the psalmist complain to God about their situation. I knew a lady in one of the early churches I served who was one of the Sunday School teachers. While she was great at her job and the children loved her, those who worked closely with her knew that she complained all the time and about everything. Her husband at one point left her because he tired of hearing her constant complaints. People avoided her or befriending her closely because of her constant complaints. The psalmists don't hesitate to complain to God and truth be known perhaps several of us do as well. Actually, the psalmist

models this for us. Isn't it great that God apparently never gets tired of listening to our complaints or perhaps God has a volume control where perhaps God can simply tune us out for a while? Don't we wish we could do that with the complainers in our lives?

This is just a small taste of what Brueggemann teaches about the psalms. I have reviewed with you some of the teachings of Walter Brueggemann as his teachings have helped me to have a new appreciation for the psalms. May hearing this and receiving it bring peace to our hearts today.

For further reading, Brueggemann,

Praying the Psalms, Second Edition: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit Paperback – May 1, 2007